

## Notice of Intent to Certify Sole Source

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**To:** Interested Parties

**From:** David C. Johnson

**CC:** ITS Project Number 46416

**Date:** August 31, 2021

**Re:** Sole Source Certification Number 4413 to provide a Semi-Autonomous Research Assistant (SARA) Subscription for the Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services (MDRS)

**Contact Name:** Evan Thiemann

**Contact Phone Number:** 601-432-8065

**Contact E-mail Address:** [evan.thiemann@its.ms.gov](mailto:evan.thiemann@its.ms.gov)

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### Sole Source Certification Award Details

Regarding Information Technology Services (ITS) Sole Source Certification Number 4413 for the Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services (MDRS) please be advised that ITS intends to award The Career Index Corporation (TCI), as the sole source provider of Semi-Autonomous Research Assistant (SARA) Subscription through August 30, 2024 in an amount not to exceed \$476,825.00. Please be advised that ITS will determine if additional enhancements or upgrades are within scope during the certification period and may increase the spending authority accordingly. Should The Career Index Corporation (TCI) change their name during this certification period, then ITS will determine if a recertification is necessary. For an explanation regarding Mississippi state law, policy and procedures for sole source procurements, refer to Attachment C: Sole Source Procurement Overview.

### Sole Source Criteria

1. The product or services being purchased must perform a function for which no other product or source of services exist:

**SARA is an AI-based virtual assistant developed specifically for the human services field. Although there are many virtual assistants on the market, they are all based on Passive Digital Assistant technology, meaning they await input before responding – typically with information or simple actions. SARA, on the other hand, is based on Active Digital Assistant technology that closely mimics what a human assistant can do. That includes knowing which client to connect with when, what information to gather from the client, being able to interview the client using two-way communication in English and Spanish, interpreting the responses, making decisions about what to do next with the client according to agency policy,**

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executing the decisions and documenting the interaction in concise and consistent case notes that SARA can then upload to the target case management system. In addition, SARA can direct connect with any case management system making it a seamless extension.

ODIN is an optional enhancement to SARA. With the addition of ODIN, MDRS will be able to set up and record video calls. SARA will then automatically add any notes from that call into the case management system.

The customer's sole source certification request is included as Attachment A.

2. The purchaser must be able to show specific business objectives that can be met only through the unique product or services:

**MDRS is a state Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agency that is tasked with bridging their case management system for the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). One such way is through the implementation of SARA.**

**SARA can communicate with almost 9,000 active MDRS clients, and because SARA works 7/24/365, clients can engage with SARA on any day at any time. This type of client engagement directly addresses the client complaint of lack of engagement. In A previous 1-month period, SARA sent 9,364 personalized messages to clients inquiring about their status and progress. If you assume that one message takes a minimum of 5 minutes to compose and send, that equates to 780 man-hours for the month or 4.5 FTEs.**

**A common business objective is the need to minimize data entry and documentation by staff members. In a prior 30-day period, SARA generated 13,429 case notes for MDRS, 3,652 for clients themselves, and 993 for staff. 93% of the data entry and documentation associated with SARA was not generated by staff, which freed them up to, amongst other things, engage in direct communications with clients (using SARA communication tools). The customer's sole source certification request is included as Attachment A.**

3. The product or services must be available only from the manufacturer and not through resellers who could submit competitive pricing for the product or services:

**SARA is a SaaS (software-as-a-service) product that is heavily configured for a target agency. This includes training SARA in an agency's operating rules as well as intensive training of agency staff. TCI has not had the desire or need for resellers with the exception of a single reseller who is only authorized to sell to local workforce investment boards where they have extensive experiences. The Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center for Quality Management (VRTAC-QM), which MDRS partners with as a member of the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies, has deemed that SARA is the only system that is being used and can be piloted by VR agencies. The sole source certification letters are included as Attachment B.**

#### Schedule

Task	Date
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First Advertisement Date	08/31/21
Second Advertisement Date	09/07/21
Response Deadline From Objectors	09/15/21 at 3:00 P.M. Central Time
Notice of Award/No Award Posted	Not before 09/16/21

## Project Details

On September 1, 2018, the Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services entered into a Master Software as a Service Agreement with The Career Index Corporation (TCI) for the use of SARA for one year, with opportunities to extend in one-year increments upon mutual consent for up to three years in total. This procurement was done outside of ITS purview. In November of 2019, ITS issued Sole Source Certification Number 4256 to provide a Semi-Autonomous Research Assistant (SARA) Subscription for MDRS and received no objections.

The Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center for Quality Management (VRTAC-QM), which MDRS partners with as a member of the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies, has deemed that SARA is the only system that is being used and can be piloted by VR agencies. The total spend to date is \$257,000.00.

## Submission Instructions and Format of Response from Objecting Parties

Interested parties who have reason to believe that the Semi-Autonomous Research Assistant (SARA) should not be certified as a sole source should provide information in the following format for the state to use in determining whether or not to proceed with awarding the Sole Source contract to The Career Index Corporation (TCI).

### 1.1 Interested Party Information

1.1.1 Contact Name, Phone Number and email address

1.1.2 Company Website URL, if applicable

### 1.2 Objection to Sole Source Certification

1.2.1 Interested parties must present specific objections to the Sole Source certification using the criteria listed above.

1.2.2 A statement regarding the Interested Party's capabilities as related to this Sole Source Certification Request.

1.3 Comments will be accepted at any time prior to Wednesday, September 15, at 3:00 p.m. (Central Time) to Evan Thiemann at [evan.thiemann@its.ms.gov](mailto:evan.thiemann@its.ms.gov) or at the Mississippi Department of Information Technology Services, 3771 Eastwood Drive, Jackson, Mississippi 39211. Responses may be delivered by hand, via regular mail, overnight delivery, e-mail or by fax. Fax number is (601) 713-6380. ITS WILL NOT BE RESPONSIBLE FOR DELAYS IN THE DELIVERY OF RESPONSES. It is solely the responsibility of the Interested Parties that responses reach ITS on time. Interested Parties may contact Evan Thiemann to verify the receipt of their Responses. Responses received after the deadline will be rejected.

1.4 Interested Party responses should include the following information:

**SUBMITTED IN RESPONSE TO**  
**Sole Source Certification No. 4413-46416**  
**Accepted until September 15, 2021 @ 3:00 p.m.,**  
**ATTENTION: Evan Thiemann**

If you have any questions concerning the information above or if we can be of further assistance, please contact Evan Thiemann at 601-432-8065 or via email at [evan.thiemann@its.ms.gov](mailto:evan.thiemann@its.ms.gov).

Attachment A: Customer Sole Source Certification Request

Attachment B: Vendor Correspondence

Attachment C: Sole Source Procurement Overview



## Sole Source Certification Request

<b>Project Title:</b>		Sara – Research Assistant Renewal			
<b>Contact Information</b>					
<b>Agency/Institution:</b>		Rehabilitation Services, Department of		<b>Contact Person:</b>	Brown, Paula
<b>Mailing Address:</b>		1281 Hwy. 51 North Madison, MS 39110		<b>Phone Number:</b>	601-853-5241
				<b>Email Address:</b>	<a href="mailto:PBrown@mdrs.ms.gov">PBrown@mdrs.ms.gov</a>
<b>MAGIC Customer #:</b> (Only required from state agencies.)			7000000184	<b>Division/Dept:</b>	IT
<b>Project Summary</b>					
<b>Description of Project:</b> (Include details of original acquisition if applicable)		This project is a continuation of SARA (Semi-Autonomous Research Assistant) subscription service renewal. It is a cloud base virtual assistant that interfaces with MDRS' Case Management system. The Agency has been using this service for our VR/VRB programs and was approved by RSA (Rehabilitation Services Administration) as a sole source subscription to interface with MDRS' case management software. MDRS has been using this service for one. The software sends out text messages to clients in regards to appointments and other information that is needed for their case and then in turn updates MDRS' case management software through case notes.			
<b>ITS Acquisition Approval (CP-1) should be effective through this date:</b>				8/30/2024	
<b>Cost Estimates</b> (Maximum allowed duration is 3 years per request/project)					
<b>Fiscal Year</b>		<b>Initial Costs</b>	<b>Ongoing Costs</b>	<b>Time Constraints</b>	<b>Estimate the Anticipated Lifecycle or Years of Product/System's Effective Use:</b>
FY	2022	\$0.00	\$129,790.00	Item Needed by: 10/13/21	6 or more years
FY	2023		\$165,325.00	Funds Expire: 11/01/21	
FY	2024		\$181,710.00	<b>Other Important Deadline(s):</b> (e.g. current contract/CP-1 expiration dates)	
<b>Total Estimated Project Cost:</b>		\$476,825.00			
<b>Funding Source:</b>		Federal – Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA)			
<b>Discuss Funding:</b> (e.g. fund number; how much of needed funding is definite; total project budget; any matching or other non-state funds)		Currently, MDRS is in the process of getting the funds approved through RSA. MDRS does not see an issue with the funding due to the fact it was approved this past fiscal year.			
<b>Acquisition Details</b>					
<b>Item or Part Number</b>	<b>Quantity</b>	<b>Description</b>			<b>Building Location(s)</b>
SARA	1	Semi-Autonomous Research Assistant			MDRS
<b>Describe Platform and Infrastructure:</b> Where does your agency plan to house or host the requested equipment or service? What resources currently available through ITS are needed (network connectivity, cloud computing/storage, colocation, business resiliency, etc.)? <b>NOTE: For equipment or services outside of current ITS available contracts and resources, justification must be attached.</b>					
The software is a cloud-based subscription service using AI and natural language processing in combination with two-way and text messaging.					
<b>Sole Source Certification -</b> Certification must be renewed for each revision or continuation of previous Sole Source Approval.					
<b>Explain why these products or services are the only ones that can meet your needs:</b> (Include specific functionality or special features that make this product or service unique.)		SARA is an AI-based virtual assistant developed specifically for the human services field. Although there are many "virtual assistants" on the market, they are all based on Passive Digital Assistant technology, meaning they await input before responding – typically with information or simple actions. SARA, on the other hand, is based on Active Digital Assistant technology that closely mimics what a human assistant can do. That includes knowing which client to connect with when, what information to gather from the client, being able to interview the client using two-way communication in English and Spanish, interpreting the responses, making decisions about what to do next with the client according to agency policy, executing the decisions and documenting the interaction in concise and consistent case notes that SARA can then upload to the target case management system. In addition, SARA can direct connect with any case management system making it a seamless extension.  ODIN is an optional enhancement to SARA. With the addition of ODIN, MDRS will be able to set up and record video calls. SARA will then automatically add any notes from that call into the case management system.			

<p><b>Specific business requirements to be met by the products/services:</b> (e.g. intended use, how it helps accomplish a task, etc.)</p>	<p>MDRS is a state Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agency that is tasked with bridging their case management system for the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). One such way is through the implementation of SARA.</p> <p>SARA can communicate with almost 9,000 active MDRS clients, and because SARA works 7/24/365, clients can engage with SARA on any day at any time. This type of client engagement directly addresses the client complaint of lack of engagement. In A previous 1-month period, SARA sent 9,364 personalized messages to clients inquiring about their status and progress. If you assume that one message takes a minimum of 5 minutes to compose and send, that equates to 780 man-hours for the month or 4.5 FTEs.</p> <p>A common business objective is the need to minimize data entry and documentation by staff members. In a prior 30-day period, SARA generated 13,429 case notes for MDRS, 3,652 for clients themselves, and 993 for staff (7%). 93% of the data entry and documentation associated with SARA was NOT generated by staff, which freed them up to, amongst other things, engage in direct communications with clients (using SARA communication tools).</p>						
<p><b>Explain why this is the only entity that can provide the products/services:</b> (Include other products/vendors researched or evaluated.)</p>	<p>SARA is a SaaS (software-as-a-service) product that is heavily configured for a target agency. This includes training SARA in an agency's operating rules as well as intensive training of agency staff. TCI has not had the desire or need for resellers with the exception of a single reseller who is only authorized to sell to local workforce investment boards where they have extensive experiences. The Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center for Quality Management (VRTAC-QM), which MDRS partners with as a member of the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies, has deemed that SARA is the only system that is being used and can be piloted by VR agencies.</p>						
<p>If for services or installations (not a product) the following two questions must be addressed.</p>							
<p><b>Vendor's proposal submitted:</b></p>		<p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No (select only one)</p>		<p><b>Vendor's Certification of Sole Source attached:</b></p>		<p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p>	
<p><b>MAGIC Vendor Code(s)</b> - Vendor must be in MAGIC before a CP-1 can be issued.</p>							
<p><b>Place Order To Vendor Code:</b></p>	<p><b>Vendor Name:</b></p>	<p>The Career Index Corporation</p>	<p><b>Remit To Vendor Code:</b></p>	<p><b>Vendor Name:</b></p>	<p>The Career Index Corporation</p>		
<p>3102055310</p>	<p><b>Vendor Address:</b></p>	<p>418 East Lakeside Ave. Coeur D' Alene, ID 83814</p>	<p>3102055310</p>	<p><b>Vendor Address:</b></p>	<p>418 East Lakeside Ave. Coeur D' Alene, ID 83814</p>		

By my signature, I certify that, to the best of my professional knowledge: the requested product or services are a sole source as outlined in the ITS Procurement Handbook, Rule 207.2:013-030 Procurement Types: Sole Source, and as outlined in Mississippi Code annotated Section 31-7-13.

*Chris M. Houas*  
Name and Title (Agency Head/Institution President/CIO)

*[Signature]*  
Signature

*8/21/2011*  
Date





**Karren C. Cresap**  
Assistant Director of Client Services  
Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services

February 25, 2021

**RE: SARA**

SARA is a virtual assistant combining two technologies: ruled-based AI and natural language processing that uses two-way email and text messaging.

The AI allows SARA to autonomously make decisions and execute actions based on input it receives as well as time passed. The natural language processing allows SARA to engage in intelligent two-way communications using SMS and MMS.

As a result, SARA knows who to engage when, can converse intelligently, interpret responses and act accordingly – just like a human assistant.

In addition, SARA includes a REST API that can engage in two-way communications you're your Aware case management system making it a seamless extension to such without requiring structural changes to Aware.

In all, SARA acts as an active, intelligent interface between clients, third parties, staff, managers and the agency's case management system.

SARA pilots in three states (Kentucky, Alaska, and Nevada) have been funded by the RSA to demonstrate that this kind of interaction is possible and because no one else has been able to demonstrate such.

Originally launched in 2015, and with forty installations in ten states to date, no other firm has fielded this combination of technologies in the human services field (or anywhere else for that matter).

Also, on April 17, 2019, SARA was acquired by The Veterans administration for national roll out on a sole source basis:

<https://www.fedhealthit.com/2019/04/va-to-award-contract-for-vre-virtual-assistant/>

Lastly, SARA is a SaaS product that is heavily configured for a target agency. This includes training SARA in an agency's operating rules as well as intensive training of agency staff. The expertise to undertake these functions are based upon years of experience. Since we value our reputation and since we have a customer backlog, we have not had the desire or need for resellers (and the associated training and indoctrination) with the exception of a single reseller who is only authorized on a case-by-case basis to sell to local workforce investment boards where they have extensive experience.

Best Regards,



6367 Alvarado Court, Suite 350  
San Diego, CA 92120  
619-594-7935 (Voice)  
619-594-4208 (Fax)

Pamela Brown, Information Technology Director  
Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services

August 12, 2021

Dear Ms. Brown:

The Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center for Quality Management (VRTAC-QM) works together with State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies (SVRAs) to identify and implement quality program and performance, and fiscal and resource management strategies and practices that will improve service delivery to, and employment outcomes achieved by, individuals with disabilities. As part of our project, we are piloting the artificial intelligence program SARA, which we also piloted under the Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Center (WINTAC).

SARA uses secure two-way communication with VR consumers to gather and report information that can be populated to AWARE seamlessly. Currently, SARA is the only system that RSA and the VRTAC-QM are piloting with State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies to bridge case management systems (with enhanced 2-way communication with participants) for SVRAs. SARA is not available from any other vendor and is the only program with a proven record of success in the field of vocational rehabilitation.

Please feel free to contact me at [ccompton@interwork.sdsu.edu](mailto:ccompton@interwork.sdsu.edu) if you need any further information.

Sincerely,

Chaz Compton, Ed.D., CRC  
Project Director, VRTAC-QM



The acquisition of information technology for all state agencies and institutions of higher learning (IHLs) is within the scope of the ITS law, found in Mississippi Code Section 25-53-1, et seq., and the policies and procedures established in accordance with this statute, found in the ITS Procurement Handbook posted on the ITS website ([www.its.ms.gov](http://www.its.ms.gov)).

ITS enabling legislation requires that information technology hardware, software and services be acquired in a manner that insures the maximum of competition among all manufacturers and suppliers of such equipment and services. Accordingly, ITS promotes full and open competition through the issuance of open specifications and the objective evaluation of Interested Party proposals to determine the lowest and best offering to meet an agency's or public university's business requirements. True competition protects the integrity and credibility of purchasing in the public sector and is essential in providing best value and adequate contractual protection for the purchasing entity. In certain limited situations, information technology acquisitions may be sole-sourced.

ITS utilizes the provisions of Public Purchasing Law for Sole Source and Emergency procurements of information technology. Mississippi Public Purchasing Law (Mississippi Code Section 31-7-13) specifies that noncompetitive items available from one source only be exempted from bid requirements (sole-sourced). ITS statute, in Section 25-53-5 (p), permits ITS to utilize provisions in Public Purchasing Law or regulations, when applicable.

Per Public Purchasing law, acquisitions must meet the following criteria to be authorized as sole source:

1. The product or services being purchased must perform a function for which no other product or source of services exists,
2. The purchaser must be able to show specific business objectives that can be met only through the unique product or services, AND
3. The product or services must be available only from the manufacturer and NOT through resellers who could submit competitive pricing for the product or services. The vendor's correspondence regarding this criterion for this project is included as Attachment B.

By policy as documented in the ITS Procurement Handbook, acquisitions of IT services must include the following information to be authorized as sole source:

1. An explanation about why the amount to be expended is reasonable, and
2. An explanation regarding the efforts by the purchaser to obtain the best possible price.

For state agencies, approval of all technology purchases with a lifecycle cost of \$5,000 or less, including sole source purchases, has been delegated to the agency. The ITS Procurement Limits Policies for Agencies (a section in the ITS Procurement Handbook) require a minimum of two competitive written bids or proposals for technology purchases with a lifecycle cost over \$5,000 but not over \$50,000 (not over \$25,000 for projects funded by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act). Since, for single source items, the procuring agency will be unable to obtain two written bids, ITS must certify all sole source acquisitions of information technology with a lifecycle cost greater than \$5,000.

Institutions of Higher Learning (IHLs) or public universities have been delegated the authority to certify sole source procurements up to \$250,000 lifecycle cost under the ITS Procurement Limits Policies for IHLs (a section in the ITS Procurement Handbook). For the certification of sole source procurements delegated to the CIOs at public universities, the public university must follow ITS' Sole Source Procedure, including advertisement of the intent to award as sole source. Institutions certifying a sole source purchase must ensure the criteria listed above are met and documented in writing by the institution and the Interested Party prior to certifying a product or service as sole source. Sole source documentation must be reviewed and approved by the IHL's CIO for any sole-source certification

above \$5,000. All sole source documentation should be retained in the public university's procurement file. Sole source requests above \$250,000 lifecycle cost require ITS approval.

Other than the delegations outlined above, all sole source technology procurements must be certified by ITS. The customer's Sole Source Certification Request for this project is included as Attachment A.

ITS thoroughly reviews Sole Source Certification Requests, determining if competing products and/or services exist. If so, ITS conducts a competitive procurement. If ITS' review confirms the sole source, then a Sole Source advertisement is issued, giving other Interested Parties an opportunity to identify competing products and/or services. Based upon the results of the Sole Source advertisement, ITS will either certify the request as a sole source or conduct a competitive procurement.